



New program investigates public health and water link

Thousands of cases of waterborne and water-related diseases worldwide are related to drinking water. A new program in the Texas A&M Health Science Center's School of Rural Public Health is working to understand this link between diseases and water and educate the public about this connection.

The Program in Public Health and Water Research was established in October 2008 within the rural public health school's Department of Environmental and Occupation Health. Dr. Vincent Nathan is its director.

This program's efforts are important because water is a necessity across the world, Nathan said. "In developing countries, we still have a high percentage of people who die from water-related diseases that are very, very preventable and curable," he said. "Not only are water-related diseases a problem but access to fresh clean water is insurmountable in some cases."

Along with the establishment of the program, the School of Rural Public Health signed an affiliation agreement with the Institute for Public Health and Water Research, a nonprofit science and education organization that relocated to College Station from the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health. The institute provides scientific direction, funds, and other support to investigators to encourage research, publications, and meetings. Dr. Jennie Ward Robinson is the executive director.



The Program in Public Health and Water Research, directed by Dr. Vincent Nathan, is part of the Texas A&M Health Science Center's School of Rural Public Health. The program researches the link between public health and water. Photo by Kathy Wythe.



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Nathan, former director of environmental affairs for the city of Detroit, said the institute chose to relocate to College Station because of the diversity of water resources researchers at Texas A&M University. He said generating ideas and opportunities from the health science center and Texas A&M in public health, environmental science, engineering, veterinary and human medicine, and international business in support of water and public health is among the program's goals.

Because many issues of public health and water are interrelated, an interdisciplinary institution is important, Nathan said. "It's important to get the engineering, medical, and agriculture community sitting down at the table discussing issues that individually they don't usually concern themselves with."

Nathan said the public health and water research program will focus on not only water-related diseases, including emerging infectious diseases, but also environmental factors that may be connected to diseases. Because 90 percent of chronic diseases are environmentally associated, he said, the program will research environmental indicators that can link a disease to aspects of the environment.

"There is some interaction of the environment on genes," he said. "We would like to help put that puzzle together."

Other focus areas include critical structures for water and public health needs such as daycares, schools, rental properties, and well water; workforce development; curriculum for health care professionals; and bottle water issues.

After approval by The Texas A&M System Board of Regents, the program will become the Center for Excellence in Public Health and Water Research, Nathan said. 💧